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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KAMPALA 001407

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM UG

SUBJECT: UGANDA: PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER BESIGYE FORESEES ELECTION RELATED VIOLENCE

REF: KAMPALA 01391; KAMPALA 01196

CLASSIFIED BY: Aaron Sampson, Pol/Econ Chief, State, Pol/Econ;  
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) president Kizza Besigye, who won 37% percent of the vote in the 2006 presidential election and is President Museveni's most formidable challenger for 2011, told PolOffs on December 15 that government officials and security forces are actively obstructing his efforts to organize rallies, access local media, raise funds, and travel abroad. Besigye said the FDC will use "every available means" to prevent Uganda's Electoral Commission, which he views as partisan, from organizing any elections, including February 2010 bi-elections for two vacant Parliamentary seats. Besigye warned that rising discontent coupled with increased government repression will lead to political violence, and urged the U.S. to pressure President Museveni to avert a "huge disaster" by respecting democratic norms. End Summary.

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Government Harassment and Intimidation  
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¶12. (C) FDC leader and likely presidential challenger Besigye said "running battles" with the Ugandan security services and local government officials are preventing the FDC from conducting business, holding meetings, and addressing the public as allowed under the law. Like many other opposition figures and journalists critical of the Museveni regime, Besigye's passport rests with government authorities pending resolution of permanently stalled treason charges. Describing himself as a "prisoner" on "temporary parole" since he was charged with treason in 2005, Besigye is required to provide invitation letters, travel dates, itineraries, and reasons for travel to authorities each time he applies to recover his passport for travel abroad. Besigye said the opaque and intrusive application process can take three days to three weeks and frequently forces him to cancel international engagements. Besigye suspects local authorities of deliberately scheduling application hearings to conflict with his proposed travel dates.

¶13. (C) Besigye complained that the Minister of Internal Affairs Kirunda Kivejinja and the Inspector General of Police (IGP) continue to rely on a provision of the Police Act, already declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, to force opposition parties to obtain written IGP approval for any meetings involving 25 people or more. Besigye said local officials in Karamoja in northeastern Uganda recently shut down even IGP-authorized events,

citing a need for verbal authorization from police in Kampala. Besigye said last minute cancellations of opposition events by government officials inflict substantial financial losses on the FDC, which must pay to organize events well in advance. The most recent invocation of the Police Act to break up an FDC event occurred December 6 in the western town of Hoima, following the December 1 arrest of Hoima's mayor and FDC official, Francis Atugonza (ref. A). Besigye accused the government of arresting Atugonza on trumped up "abuse of office" charges to wrest control of Hoima's local government from the FDC.

¶4. (C) Besigye said FDC leaders are also unable to appear on FM radio stations outside of Kampala. Uganda has more than 150 mostly privately owned FM radio stations. Besigye said the FDC is generally able to obtain air time in Kampala but has been blacklisted from radio stations outside the capital, which Besigye said are generally owned by government officials or ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) members. Besigye said radio stations in Karamoja and Fort Portal barred him from appearing on air even though the FDC had already paid for the airtime.

¶5. (C) The FDC leader said the Ugandan government is preventing him from fundraising. He said government intimidation and harassment prevents FDC members from purchasing party membership cards or openly affiliating themselves with an opposition party. Private

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individuals and companies, meanwhile, refrain from writing checks to either the FDC or Kizza Besigye for fear of government reprisals. Besigye said an oil company that rents a property from him arranged to write rent checks in his lawyer's name to avoid provoking government ire.

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Electoral Opposition: We're All Going to Prison

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¶6. (C) Besigye reiterated prior FDC statements regarding his party's refusal to participate in elections organized by Uganda's Electoral Commission, which he and many observers view as partisan in favor of the NRM (ref. B). He said the FDC will not participate in "farce" elections organized by the current Commission. Besigye added that the FDC would not withdraw from elections or boycott, but will use "every available means" to ensure that elections under the current Commission do not take place. He offered few additional details, beyond a vague indication of upcoming legal challenges - although he also said the FDC no longer has faith in the Ugandan judiciary - and acts of "civic action." At another point Besigye and FDC spokesman Wafula Ogutu said "we are all going to go to prison. The writing is on the wall." Besigye said his pledge to prevent the Electoral Commission from organizing elections applies not only to the presidential election in February 2011, but also to by-elections for two vacant Parliament seats. The two by-elections have not yet been scheduled, but will likely be held in February 2010.

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FDC's Electoral Platform

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¶ 7. (C) Nevertheless, Besigye continues to crisscross Uganda looking for votes. His appeal to voters is based on the general question of whether everyday Ugandans feel their lives are getting better or worse. In his stump speeches, Besigye blames increasing poverty, rising corruption, deteriorating infrastructure, continued lack of electricity, poor schools, and lack of government services on President Museveni and NRM mismanagement, and presents himself as the candidate of change. Besigye proposed drastically reducing the size of the Ugandan government, by eliminating Resident District Commissioners and other administrative structures closely tied to President Museveni's "resistance movement" ideology, and clamping down on rampant corruption. Besigye said this will free up additional funding for critical yet neglected social services like health and education.

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International Help to Avert Disaster  
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¶ 8. (C) Besigye said rising discontent, coupled with increased government repression, will eventually result in significant violence. He said the deadly September 10-12 riots in Kampala signified an explosion of pent up anger fueled not by Buganda nationalists but poverty-stricken unemployed youth. He noted that many of the shops targeted by rioters were supermarkets looted by citizens simply looking for food. He said the increasingly opulent lifestyles of senior government leaders is compounding this discontent, and that "unless the NRM checks itself and reflects on its own legacy, we are headed for a huge disaster." Besigye said the international community needs to act now in order to have a positive influence on Uganda's short-term political future. He urged the U.S. to use its leverage with Museveni, both privately and publicly through stern statements, to send a message that

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deviations from democratic norms are not acceptable.

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Comment: Don't Dismiss Besigye  
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¶ 9. (C) Besigye appeared relaxed, thoughtful, and in good humor. Having managed to win 37% of the vote in 2006 despite spending a good part of the campaign season in prison on trumped up rape, terrorism and treason charges, Besigye is a serious presidential contender. While he may not beat President Museveni outright, if a free and fair election were run today, Besigye might force Museveni below the critical 50% threshold. Besigye's accusations of government intimidation and harassment - particularly in regard to disruption of opposition events and access to local media - correspond with our own observations. Left unchecked, continued state sponsored harassment of Besigye and the FDC will likely force Uganda's political opposition parties to use the only tools left in their arsenal - legal disputes, civil disobedience and, potentially, violence.

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